

[Personal Interview with Dr. Amy Clark, Professor of Communication and Appalachian Studies at The University of Virginia's College at Wise – Wednesday, March 20, 2019]

Telena Turner (TT): How did you first get in to studying Appalachian culture and literature?

Amy Clark (AC): I took Appalachian Prose and Poetry as an undergraduate. Our professor allowed us to choose a traditional research paper project or oral history collection from our family. I chose oral history, and that process (along with the literature we read by James Still, Harriet Simpson Arnow, Lee Smith, and Denise Giardina) inspired me to continue Appalachian studies.

TT: What would you say that it means to be Appalachian?

AC: How people identify as Appalachian differs because it's a complex region, contrary to stereotypes that paint us as poor, white, straight Protestants. The region is about 900 miles long and its migration patterns and industries have shaped the northern, midland, and southern cultures in unique ways. Growing up Black in Appalachia, for example, will prompt a different definition of what it means to be Appalachian than growing up white. I'm thinking specifically of Frank X Walker's book and term "Affrilachian;" the book of poetry is his own answer to that question. For me as a white woman from the southwest Virginia portion of the Appalachians, it's about the connection to mountain culture and thinking about my place in the timeline of our history.

TT: What is the role of Appalachian literature, especially in regard to preserving and promoting Appalachian traditions?

AC: Well, you gave part of the answer: it preserves and promotes traditions, vernacular speech patterns, folklore, etc. But I also think its role is to invert, as well...to upend traditional ideas about the region and its people. Much of the literature of the 70's-90's tackled environmental and feminist themes; today's literature explores the complexities of identity, race, sexual orientation. Appalachian work is emerging about Black Appalachians, LGBTQ Appalachians, Jewish Appalachians. I'm thinking of Silas House, whose novel *Southernmost* just won the Weatherford Award for Fiction.

TT: Are there any general themes/motifs that typically emerge in Appalachian literature?

AC: They have changed over time; the literature trends toward whatever people are fighting for or against in the region. There are patterns of contrasting the old Appalachia and new Appalachia, particularly in the South, as in *Burning Bright* by Ron Rash. Environmental issues are still important, as is exploitation. As I said in my previous answer, the search to understand identity and what that means is a motif you see. But the literature is also turning its lens on problems like drug abuse, which is significant in parts of Appalachia where the industry leads to broken bodies that rely on painkillers. I'm thinking of Robert Gipe's novel series that began with *Trampoline*. *Weedeater* is the second of that series. I'm also thinking of Carter Sickels' *The Evening Hour*.

[The following questions are specific to topics in Clyde Edgerton's The Floatplane Notebooks⁷]

TT: In the novel, the characters travel to a family graveyard once a year to clean it and to share family stories. How is death generally regarded in Appalachian tradition?

AC: In areas where the Christian tradition is significant, death for many is another step in the cycle of life, but one that leads to a greater reward for those who have lived according to the Bible's teaching. The process of dying, grieving, and burial are important, particularly as they bring families together to shepherd the dying person through the transition, recognizing their life's importance during the wake, and saying goodbye as they bury them. Food is an important part of this process, too; it's one way that communities support grieving families. Once the body is in the grave, it becomes a revered place. In my family, for example, it is taught that you update the flowers on gravestones frequently.

TT: Also, the characters often spend time sharing family stories, or just talking together. What is the significance of the oral tradition in Appalachian culture?

AC: So many people in Appalachia say they were raised among "front porch storytellers." The oral tradition has its roots in preliterate days when ballads were the primary ways that people entertained themselves or taught moral lessons to the young. I listened to stories among my family in many situations, from putting up tobacco to women giving each other home permanents to canning tomatoes in the kitchen. The work we do gives us the means to gather and talk. The oral tradition is also significant because, like literature, it preserves, whether it's story, music, or dialects. This may be changing now with younger generations who have only ever known a life influenced by social media and the internet; I think that's going to have a significant impact going forward.

TT: Finally, one of the characters (Mr. Copeland) keeps a journal to record progress on a plane that he's building, but he also uses the journal to keep family records and events. Is the practice of keeping journals or records common, and what purpose might it serve for the family or the people who do keep those records?

AC: Historically, people kept records in different places. My own studies of Appalachian women and literacy reveal that journals may be used for recording prayers, travels, and key life events. But cookbooks also serve as places of record, and not just for recipes (birth dates, death dates, important weather events. etc.) The family Bible is probably the most common place that people record family records of births and deaths because (a) it invites that kind of information in its early pages and (b) it would be considered a safe space for keeping important information since that's a revered document and treated as such. I do think in Appalachia, genealogy and family history is a passion for many people because so many of us stayed in the same place for generations, and we heard those stories passed down about our ancestors. There's a pull toward knowing more about where we come from.